

Comforting the afflicted.

The single most important thing that we can do in ministering to those who suffer is to break the sense of isolation that suffering brings. We attack that isolation by “showing up” by just being there.

Some of us have a gift in ministering to those who suffer. We may know instinctively what to do and love doing it. The rest of us may be a bit more clumsy at ministering to those who hurt but we are called by a loving Spirit to “show up.” There are principles that can guide one who wants to help those who suffer. Here are some suggestions that can get us started.

One - Recognize when suffering is present.

Sometimes we miss the aching hearts and empty souls of those we touch every day. It could be because we are not in touch with our own emptiness and pain. Or it could be that we are just so preoccupied with our pain or our pain-killers. Jesus’ spiritual radar never missed the echo of a wounded soul in his presence. It could be a lonely woman, a small sized man, a frightened leader, a confused crowd, a desperate lamb man, or a broken hearted parent. He seemed to be able to see right into the hurting hearts around him and speak to them words of hope, love, and life.

Sometimes people around us do not project suffering when in fact they are in deep pain. Sometimes people medicate their pain so quickly that they give the impression that there is no feeling left. I remember visiting the hospital at the death of an 18 month old child. The parents were calm and matter of fact as though nothing had happened. I found myself weeping alone at the bed side of this precious infant. How could this be? The parents had already mourned the loss of their child long before he died. For them the death was a part of a process that I had not shared. Would their grief return? Yes, and with unexpected severity but if I were to minister to them I would have to stay close enough to be there when they needed me and others. I have had people try to minister to me, assuming that I was suffering when in fact I was not. It was hard to know how to tell them that I was not in pain when they assumed that because my loss would have crushed them it should have crushed me also.

It is safe to assume that whenever there is a loss of any sort there will be pain and suffering. That does not mean that there will in deed always be pain but it is a time when we should have our antenna up. Moving toward someone with sensitive concern and interest in their soul is seldom inappropriate and will generally be appreciated. I have found that a few simple questions are helpful door openers. I often simply ask, “Where does it hurt?” I then give lots of time to listening. I don’t want to give answers, nor do I want to understand all of the why’s and what’s. I just want to feel the pain with them. I want my questions to make it safe for those around me to feel their own pain and let it blossom to the place where God’s Spirit can speak through it. If my thesis is correct, that we know Christ through our suffering then I minister to others when I help them recognize their pain and suffering.

Two - Relax your spirit.

One of the first tendencies that I face as a man is to fix the world. This impulse is a part of God's image in me but it too often is used without wisdom and sensitivity to the Spirit's timing and process. One of the first things I must do if I am going to help those who suffer is to relax my spirit and remind myself that I am not called to administer pain-killers or healing remedies as first aid. Nor am I to be shocked by what I hear or see. This is only possible if I am in touch with my own brokenness and pain.

The first aid of the Spirit is a relaxed attitude that projects hope, love, and faith knowing God is present in this thing that seems so difficult to bear. I need not see how God is working yet, nor do I need to have clever skills to medicate the pain. I need simply to not panic and project confidence in God. I need to have faith, not that the suffering will be removed but that it will be met with faith, hope, and love.

Three - Respect those who hurt.

One of the great fears that those of us who suffer, feel in our pain is that we will be abandoned through disrespect. Will you reject me, or leave me because I am breaking up and unable to manage my life so as to avoid suffering and pain? One of the most important words that I can offer to a suffering person is that I do not reject them or think less of them because of their suffering. Even when the pain comes from their own foolishness and sin I can assure them that I will not turn my spirit from them. This does not mean that I will agree with all that they believe, think, or do. I will be there as God is there. He accepts us in His Son even though He does not always agree with what we believe, think, or do. I respect another person because they bear the image of God and if they share my Christian faith they are a part of a covenant community where their burdens become mine in some special way.

Four - Repeat your visitation.

The best way I can communicate that I have not rejected a suffering friend is by not making my visitation a "one night stand." When I repeatedly call, and visit, I send a message that I have not left them or forgotten. A note, a phone call, a gift, a special visit can be the most powerful signal that God is there and that He cares. Just think about it for a moment. How have those around you communicated their loving heart? Has it not been through their repeated overtures to move toward your soul with deep interest.

Five - Relate to your own pain.

I like to define love with this anachronism – Listening to concerns, Overlooking faults, Valuing strengths, and Empathizing with hurts. Empathy is a powerful part of love. It is drawing from the reservoirs of our own pain and joy, gifts that can be put on the alter of shared community. We are bonded together into community by our shared pain and joy. When you or I relate a part of our own lives that involves an emotional response that is similar to that of another, we build emotional community.

Six - Remind others of Jesus' example and the cross.

In the same way that we empathize with the suffering of others, we can help them understand how God also empathizes with their pain and suffering. While there might be a time and a need to draw on other resources from the life and teaching of our Lord so as to heal the wounded, our first resource is the Suffering Servant Himself. To know that he understands and cares is often enough to get us to the place where we can find our spiritual wings. I am constantly amazed at the power of community and the destructive force of isolation. Most of us derive tremendous power and encouragement from knowing that we are not alone in our pain.

Seven - Remove obstacles to healthy grieving if appropriate.

There are little things that can mean a lot at times when a person's energy is focused on grief. Proving meals, caring for pets, cleaning house, taking care of chores, calling friends, etc. As someone is in grief many things can fall through the cracks and create hardships down the road. Lifting a person up by caring for their ordinary needs can be a wonderful gift of love when you may not have the words to comfort or heal.

Eight - Recruit help from others.

The family of God should be at its best in times of grief and calibration. Many hands make work light and provide opportunity to develop a sense of community. Taking responsibility to organize a community effort is a valuable gift that can accomplish a number of spiritually important objectives—bringing comfort to the one grieving, developing a sense of community among those who help, encouraging others to share the privilege of ministry, and showing to the world the love of God within His family.

Nine - Ratify the truth.

The truth sets us from so many things including grief, anger, a sense of isolation, etc. The most important truths we can ratify or reinforce are: 1. We are not alone in suffering—Jesus and his family share the pain. 2. Our hope is real and this loss is not the end of the story. 3. It is in periods of grief and pain that we stand closest to knowing Christ.

Ten - Release a person to the care of the Great Shepherd.

The Great Shepherd should always be the one that we count on, point others to, and trust to bring comfort, insight, and hope in ways that only He can. This is important as we relinquish our own tendency to perhaps take too much responsibility in ministry. We are limited in ways God's Spirit is not. We do well to reflect a posture of confidence in the reality of Christ's Spirit to comfort. We also do well to remind people of the Spirit's work and pray with them for the Spirit's power and comfort.